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## SUCCESS STORY

### SEAWEED FARMING: Ex-MNLF fighters get better prices for seaweed produce



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Mora Seraji, president of the Dayang Balukbuk Multipurpose Cooperative.

The old adage, give a man a fish -- feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish -- feed him for a lifetime, may need to be updated to reflect the new global economic conditions.

These days, it's best to teach a man not only to catch a fish but to sell quality fish at competitive prices.

This, in essence, is what the United States Agency for International Development's Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) program is doing with former fighters of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) whom they helped become seaweed farmers following the 1996 peace agreement between them and the government.

In the village of Tongbangkaw, around four hours by boat from the provincial capital of Bongao in Tawi-Tawi, three new large solar dryers (slatted-bamboo platform) on stilts are making it possible for cooperatives to dry more seaweed and sell them at better prices. Most seaweed farmers dry their produce on plastic mats or tarpaulins spread over beach sand. This method contaminates the seaweed thus giving wholesale seaweed traders the justification to buy farmers' products at a lower price.

"Maganda yung bilad dito kasi maganda at walang dumi, walang reduction [It's good to use the solar dryer because it's big and there's no dirt, no price reduction]," said Mora Seraji, president of the Dayang Balukbuk Multipurpose Cooperative. "Kung doon sa buhangin, malaki ang deduction. [If we dry over sand, we get a big price deduction]." A kilogram (kg) of dirt-free dried seaweed can be sold for P32 in Bongao. Contaminated seaweed sells at around one-third less at P22/kg.

"Ten pesos ang diperensiya. 'Yan ang malaking diperensiya ng solar dryer at saka magbilad sa buhangin (There's a P10 difference. That's the big difference between using a solar dryer and drying over sand)," said Mr. Seraji, a former MNLF fighter who once instructed other Moro women combatants how to evade capture. "With proper drying and handling of seaweed, planters can reduce post-harvest losses and cut their over-all financial losses by about 15%," stated a GEM project profile.

The 250-square meter solar dryers, each costing around half a million pesos, are among the 700 small infrastructure projects being implemented in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao and in other conflict-affected areas of Mindanao under GEM 2. These projects are undertaken in partnership with local governments, farmers, fisherfolk organizations, women's cooperatives and other organizations that contribute 25% of the cost of the project.

At least 110 members of three cooperatives in barangay Tongbangkaw -- the Dayang Balukbuk Multipurpose Cooperative, TTSRC Bangsamoro Women's Multipurpose Cooperative, and Sumping Malul Bangsamoro Multi-purpose Cooperative -- will directly benefit from the new solar dryers. Other seaweed farmers of Tongbang-kaw village can also use the solar dryers for a small rental fee of P25 per picul (100 kg). Around 400 seaweed farmers in Panglima Sugala municipality will stand to benefit from other solar dryers that we are building or will build to improve the incomes of former MNLF combatants," said Cebenerio Dispo Jr., GEM community infrastructure specialist.

"Kahit marami sila ibilad dito, wala nang problema, mabilad nila, matuyo lahat [If there are many who want to use the solar dryer, it's not a problem. They all can dry it]," said Mr. Seraji. "Huwag lang sila magsabay-sabay. Mag rotate sila (But they have to use it one-by-one. They have to rotate.)"

Ten percent of the rental income will be set aside for maintenance and repair of the solar dryers. Two members from each cooperative have been trained in simple carpentry and masonry in case the bamboo flooring of the solar dryer becomes broken. Other officers of the cooperatives will be trained in financial management.

Depending on the size of their farm and the amount of capital invested, seaweed farmers earn between P7,000 and P15,000 for every harvest season of seaweed, said Bidin Pangilan, barangay chairman of Tongbang-kaw. One cropping cycle of seaweed takes between two to three months. There are four cropping cycles a year.

The Dayang Balukbuk Multipurpose Cooperative has 70 new applicants. This is good news for Mr. Seraji since it will mean the growth and development of the cooperative.

"Kung ang coop maglaki na, yung mga bigas, asukal, pagkain, doon sa amin magkuha [If our cooperative grows, they will be buying rice, sugar, food from us]," he said. The Philippines is the world's biggest producer of dry seaweed (Eucheuma) and semi-refined carrageenan. The seaweed farmers of Sulu and Tawi-Tawi produce around 70% of the national production. -- GEM